

THE TRAIL OF THE DEAD

V--The Ammonia Cylinder

THE sail crept forward down the river of sunset gold that streamed in wild splendor from a crevice in the ranges of cloudland. The light that burnished the sea glowed upon the Pollock cliffs, tingling with fire the breakers at their feet; it threw fierce shadows among the clustered cottages of the Cornish Isherfolk, and painted a richer scarlet on the sails of the trawlers huddled beneath the sheltering arm of the little quay. It was a scene that rises before me, as I write, with a curious detail, though, indeed, at the time I took no pains to observe it. For on that departing vessel was he whom we had chased across Europe, madman as we supposed, murderer as we knew him to be. We had saved an innocent girl from his vendetta, and in my heart I thanked Providence for that mercy; but Rudolf Marnac, the Heidelberg professor, was still free, free with fresh schemes of vengeance against his twisted brain, and with all the wisdom of his great learning to help him in his deadly purposes.

"So this is the end of your clever plans!" I cried, turning savagely on my burly cousin. "He has escaped again, got clear away. What are you going to do? Shall we follow him?"

"Why not—if that is the best you can suggest?"

"You have changed, my little cousin," said he, regarding me with a kindly look, though, indeed, my words had been unammanly. "The fates have played the very deuce with the sedate student at Heidelberg just twelve days ago. How that youngster grumbled at prospective discomforts! How he shrank from the thought of being mixed up in a business that was 'better left to the police!' Do you remember?"

"Don't we waste time?" said I.

"Perhaps, Ah! here she comes—just the thing for which I was hoping." Running down the village street came Miss Weston, with three or four men behind her. We met her at the entrance to the quay.

"Well! have you caught him?" she panted.

"No; there he goes." My cousin pointed an arm at the distant sail.

"Oh, thank God!" she exclaimed earnestly. "I knew he was armed, and I was so afraid for the brave men who had saved my father and me." She looked from one to the other of us with an honest gratitude in her eyes that to me seemed worth the risk of all the dangers in the world.

"And Dr. Weston?" asked my cousin.

"My father is no more; but of course I did not tell him all. He imagines that I was snatched by some tramp, and declares he will have a man about the cottage in the future. You and your friend must come back with me, Sir Henry. I want to introduce you to him."

"Some other time, I hope. At present this young firebrand insists that we should follow Marnac by sea."

"That is quite impossible, sir," she said, turning upon me with an anxious look. "I have enough experience of the weather to know that a storm is coming. I am certain that Sir Henry Graden will help me to dissuade you."

"I am afraid not, Miss Weston," broke in my cousin before I could reply. "We have been like over-eager hounds, losing the scent by flashing forward too quickly. It must be sheer, dogged hunting now, and no more cutting off corners. By the way, there is little fact which one of you can tell me," he said, turning to the little group that hung behind her skirts watching us with a bucolic interest. "Did the Agnes Jane yonder carry provisions on board?"

"Surely, zur," said one who stood a little forward of the rest, a stout, bearded man with a face as brown and seamed as a withered elder apple. "Mark Pennyfold, as is owner, was telling about this furrin gent only last night down to the 'Plough Inn.' 'E allowed 'e ad 'is orders to keep a week's vittles on board, though the reason was passin' his understanding."

"But, Isaac," broke in Miss Weston, "when the story gets round to Mark Pennyfold, he will say that you refused because you knew that the Pride could never catch the Agnes Jane."

"Zo he wull,—the liard!" cried Isaac, with a sudden burst of indignation. "I never thought on that, miss. A pretty tale he will be telling in every public from Bude to Penzance! Come along gentlemen, come along. I'll show 'e a thing, and Mark, tu, the liard!"

We ran to where the little trawler lay moored to the quay, and tumbled on board. One man was sitting in her stern mending some tackle, and Isaac apparently considered his services sufficient, for he cast off the ropes all once, Miss Weston was waiting on the head of the quay as our boat crept by. I shall always remember that picture of my darling as she stood on those old gray stones, with their seaweed beard drooping to the swirl of the tide below. The fire of the sunset lit her tall, graceful figure leaning to the breeze. One hand was to her hair, the other waving adieu. No fairer figure of encouragement could men desire who started on a perilous adventure.

"Good-by! God keep you both!" So she cried to us.

We shouted a reply, but I doubt if she heard it, for at that moment the wind caught the great red sail on our foremast, swinging it across with a thunderous flapping that shook the little vessel from stem to stern. In another moment we were rushing forward in pursuit, with the spray from the bow in our faces and a white trail of foam marking our path from the land.

I do not think that more than ten minutes had passed from the moment of our arrival on the quay, though by my writing it may seem that I have underestimated the time. The Agnes Jane was, as far as I could judge, a mile away to the southward, a distance which we decreased to barely a thousand yards before the full strength of the growing wind was brought reached her. After that, however, we gained very slowly, if at all.

I was never a good sailor, a fact which the long rollers soon recalled to my remembrance. The occasional bursts of spray which flew over my head greatly to my discomfort, for my clothes, though warm, were not waterproof. I have always been susceptible of chills, and the prospect of passing the night in dripping garments seriously alarmed me. It was, therefore, with a sense of relief that I observed Isaac produce some oilskins, and boots happily lined with flannel.

The seafaring appearance which I assumed did not, however, allay my internal sufferings, which soon became acute. Had I not been so near the boat, I was tempted to the chase with an appearance of interest which was mere hypocrisy. To be sincere, I regarded my cousin, who was enjoying a pipe of strong-smelling tobacco on the windward side of me, with a more immediate enmity than I felt toward Marnac himself.

The sun sank amidst a cloud conflagration of sulch and thunderous magnificence. The coastline behind us darkened and faded until the crests of the breaking waves rose ghastly white against the gloom of the shrouded land. But minutely the sky above us was still clear, and a silver crescent of the moon, swinging at an angle as if the wind had tilted her, showed us the chase heading southward. It was evidently some port in France for which she pointed. My cousin had joined Isaac, who was at the tiller, and the pair conversed in low tones, glancing frequently to the northwest, from which the wind blew strong and cool.

It was, according to my remembrance, past 9 o'clock that the steady pressure of the wind failed. In its place came gusts, fierce and uncertain, spaced with lulls of restless calm. Ignorant as I was of sea weather, I began to grow uneasy. There seemed a menace in the dark, mysterious wall of cloud to windward, a rampart edged with silver from the moon. Motionless it hung like a heavy curtain that at its rising would reveal some monstrous spectacle. For the first time I realized the insignificance of our boat, its loneliness amidst the hurrying wastes of the sea, and my anxiety passed into alarm. It was about this time that my nausea suddenly left me, for I was well aware that an excess of seasickness may result in a serious condition.

It was in one of the lulls I have mentioned that Isaac gave my cousin a hand and with his man's assistance lowered at the stern which, as he knew nautically, as the jigger. They also reefed the larger canvas on the foremast. The Agnes Jane, which was not more than 40 yards away, showed no sign of following our example.

"Mark Pennyfold must be mazed," said Isaac on his return. "E must have seen us chance o' speaking 'im, and now 'e be changing his boat by carrying on with that press o' zail. Plize to keep thy hand in the tiller, zur."

The little Cornishman rolled forward to where I sat, and stood, making a hollow of his hands. A great stillness held the sea and air, save for the whisper of the gliding waves.

"The Agnes Jane, ahoy!" He drove the words over the black waters like the blast of a trumpet.

"The Agnes Jane, ahoy!" Again he called, and this time there came an answering voice.

"Help!" It cried—the one word—and was silent. We waited, but that was all.

"It is no good, Treherne," said my cousin. "They have an ugly customer on board who does not mean to be taken. He has a pistol at their heads as like as not. They must take their chance of—"

His words were lost in a stirring note like the tugging of a giant harpstring, a note that rose to a shriek and then melted into a rattling, drumming roar, the uttermost diapason of the storm wind. For some seconds we heeled over, so that I could have dipped my face in the bubbling waters; and then, slowly gathering way, we shot forward through the flying spray, with Treherne yelling to his man in

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COLLABORATOR WITH SIR A. CONAN DOYLE IN "THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES"



In the Middle of the Flooring There Gaped a Little Hole, With a Heavy Square of Wood Lying Beside It.

tones that even outshouted the squall itself.

We were upon her almost before I realized the disaster that had befallen her. I caught a glimpse of the level line of timbers about the keel, the red sails awash in streaks of heaving foam; and then I was conscious of a cold grip at something in the water. For a moment I thought he would be dragged from the boat, but Isaac, letting go the tiller, circled his legs with a pair of muscular arms and held on like the little bulldog he was. With three great heaves Graden heaved and blinded, with a fourth he landed it fairly on board. The Agnes Jane had gone, and with her the unfortunate men she carried—save Marnac only.

Thus fate in its own strange manner had given him to us at last!

Shouting like a madman, I started toward the stern, where my cousin was bending over the huddled body he had saved. But even as I did so I saw a black mass, streaked and crested with hissing white, rush up from the obscurity to windward. For a space it seemed to hang above us, while Isaac yelled as he tugged wildly at the tiller. Then, with a wild roar that drummed in my ears like the explosion of a mine, it threw itself upon us, hurling us into the bottom of the boat, choked, deafened, and blinded.

I do not know how we lived through that first furious hour. Isaac Treherne made no second mistake, but crouched at the tiller, tricking the succession of great seas that swung upon us out of the throbbing blackness. Stung by passing hailstorms, drenched to the skin, and aching with cold, I toiled with a tin pail, baling, baling, until my back creaked with stiffness and my hands could scarcely feel the handle. Graden and the sailor worked beside me, so that we managed to keep the water under. Now and again a silt in the rushing dark above us showed me Marnac lying by the steersman's side. Was he alive or dead? I did not know, nor did I stay my labor to make inquiry.

The daylight came at last, the God-given light for which all poor mariners must pray in their hours of danger. With it came a jessening of the wind

and a falling sea. Yet there had been an angry menace in the brilliant colors that lit the eastern sky, and I stared eagerly over the muddy green of the hurrying surges. Indeed, I was the first to see a steamer's smudge of smoke on the western skyline.

"Her be making for us, gentlemen," marked our steersman, after a long stare at the distant vessel. "Happen her would take 'e aboard, if you be so minded. The weather be blowing in again, and it's a long reach back to Pollock."

I don't like deserting the ship, Isaac, said Graden; "though, to tell the truth, I don't relish another day in the chops of the Channel."

"Bain't no desertion, sir. Me and Jake can take her whomever, and to tell 'e the truth, he'll ride the lighter for the want of him!"

He pointed to where Marnac sat crouching under an oilskin coat. Save that he looked dead, the old man for occasional shivers, the old man seemed to be no worse for his hand-shake with Death. He received the sailor's remark with a benevolent smile. "Don't 'e go grinning at me, you wicked-minded old toad!" cried Isaac. "Twas only through special mercies that Providence forgot you was on board. We'd ha' been sunk for zarten, else."

Within half an hour we could see the steamer clearly, an ancient tramp of the seas, bluff in the bows, square in the flank, with a coloring of soot and rusty iron. She answered our signals with a melancholy toot and a nod toward us. Graden, who had been watching her approach at my side, turned and walked aft.

"I have already dropped your revolver overboard, Prof. Marnac," he said; "but I must trouble you to hand me your pocketbook. Money, you know, is often the most valuable of weapons."

pockets are now completely empty. Ah, Mr. Harland, forgive me if I did not notice you before. I fear that these nautical adventures will interrupt your course of studies. Did you hear whom I should be sorry if my students, among whom I always held you to be the most studious, if not the most able, should be long without a lecture—like a sheep that have lost their shepherd, Mr. Harland."

I turned from him with a feeling of nausea. Mad or sane, he had done such deeds as placed him beyond the intercourse of humanity.

The steamer was close upon us now, and as she came rolling down the waves of the swell, we were hailed from the bridge in a tongue that was strange to me. Before we could reply, a seaman had sprung to the bulwarks and sent the coils of a line spinning over us. This Isaac made fast, allowing a fair space to intervene between his little craft and the rusty metal fabric that towered above us.

"Good-by, Isaac," said Graden, shaking the little Cornishman warmly by the hand. "I will see to your check the moment I get to London."

"Don't 'e mention it, zur. I was right proud to take 'e. Nor do 'e trouble about me uns. Jake and I will be making Pollock by midnight at latest—please be."

It was an anxious scramble—they had to swing out a chair for Marnac—but the traveler was as handy as a rowboat, and at last the three of us stood on the deck of the stranger. A more ill-assorted trio of bedraggled voyagers never ranged in line.

But if we were strange to look upon, so were the group of men who confronted us. They were of the degenerate Latin breed, dark, small, uncertain in temper, and dirty by nature and training. Their seafaring dress seemed as ill-suited to them as a sash and a colored cloak would be to a British shellback.

hension. Plainly his vocabulary was of the smallest.

"These men are Portuguese, Sir Henry," said Marnac, stepping quickly forward. "I know their tongue. Allow me to explain the situation."

But he got no further. My cousin's long arm shot out, gripping his collar firmly from behind. With a gentle heave, he swung the professor from his feet and dropped him behind us.

"Please to keep silence, Professor Marnac. Your explanations might be somewhat biased," said he, with a grim smile. And then turning to the sailors, who had been watching the little scene with evident surprise—

"Do none of you speak English!" he asked.

They seemed to understand the question, for some talk, ended by much gesticulation, ended in one of their number tramping up the ladder to the bridge, where he disappeared into the wheelhouse. An instant later a long, red-headed man emerged and came running towards us.

"And shure wud Oi not have greeted yer honors before now," he exclaimed in the most strenuous of brogues; "but 'twas me truck at the wheel, and niver a man of these spalpeens could relieve me. An' what can Oi do fer ye now at all?"

"What boat is this?"

"The Portuguese ship, San Joseph, fr'm Buenos Ayres to Hamburg, wid a mixed cargo, and a darned mixed crew, sorr. If it hadn't been for a back answer whin the wine was in me, faith! it's not in this greasy darr-iron that Tim Blake wud be after serving."

"Do you speak the language, my man?"

"Indade an' Oi do, sorr; an' good reason, sezint that 'is fower years come Christmas that Oi've been aboard on th' yacht iv wan iv th' Portuguese nobility."

"That's good news. And now where is the captain?"

"Faith! but 'twas a jool iv a time we were after havin' in the bay last night, sorr; an' the old man's turned in. The second mate has gone aft, gatherin' his courage in both hands fer to wake him. Indade, sorr, 'tis a resolution that wud put the fear iv the Lord into a better man than him."

"Rather a Tartar, eh?"

"A strong man, sorr, an' a good seaman fer a greater, though his temper is most pro-digious. But see, here he comes, like a dork out iv a theater?"

He was indeed a fine figure of a man, fully six feet in height and proportionately broad. His skin was very dark, and his eyes of the deep blackness that I have since observed in Indian races, but very soft and glowing. His hair, which he wore at a greater length than is customary amongst sailors, showed under his cap in glossy curls; and his mustache was twisted back almost to his ears.

He bowed to us with a deliberate courtesy, muttering a greeting in his own tongue. He spoke no English, and it was through the medium of Tim Blake that he offered us hospitality.

It was no time for explanations, so, guarding Marnac between us, we hurried down to a large cabin where warm garments and steaming glasses of hot brandy and water were brought by the worthy Irishman, to whose care we had been assigned. As far as could be judged, I had not contracted so much cold in the head, despite my long exposure. When we had completed our change of clothes, my cousin beckoned me outside the cabin, closing the door on our prisoner.

"I have asked Blake to take me to the captain, for it is right that he should know the true position of affairs," he whispered. "While I am gone, you must sit with Marnac. Remember, do not let him out of your sight for a moment."

he is lurking among the pork and biscuits. If so, we ought to find him easily enough. I don't want to bring the crew into this affair if I can help it. It will be enough if the captain knows."

"That's the blackest part of the luck. The ship caught it pretty badly last night; they were right in the thick of it. I found the captain on deck superintending three or four sailors who were clearing away the wreckage of one of the boats. He was in an amazing temper, and Blake advised me that if I had a favor to ask him, I had best let him cool off a bit. So I dismissed the Irishman and climbed up to the bridge. I should think I'd been there about twenty minutes watching the work, when I saw a sharp-looking lad pop out from the companion and go over to where the captain was standing. They had a fine pow-wow together, looking up at me from time to time. It rather puzzled me, and presently I dropped down the stairs and went to where they were. The captain seemed decidedly chilly, and I soon saw by his manner that he was not wanting a talk just then. Whereupon I came below. So kindly light the lamp I see in the bracket yonder, Cousin Robert, and we'll go hunting again."

We descended the ladder, Graden going first, and I followed with the lamp, the light of which I endeavored to throw over his shoulder.

It seems a cowardly thing to confess, writing as I am in the broad daylight, with the bees amongst the flowerbeds singing their songs through the open window, but though we were two to one, and our quarry an old man, my cousin had twice to rate me for the deliberation of my movements. We peered about among the lurking shadows, with the thunder of the seas hammering on the iron sides without. Now and again a heavy step would send us staggering apart, to bring up among unexpected barrels. Perhaps it was the want of sleep that had jangled my nerves, but I knew in my heart that if I were suddenly to catch a sight of those wicked eyes staring out from the gloom before us, I should shriek and run like a hysterical schoolgirl.

But Marnac was not there. The grate of the second stairway was closed and locked, and yet he had disappeared. Some one had helped him—that was plain enough. We stood disconsolate among the details of the ship's larder.

"Well, he's gone right enough," said my cousin. "Hallo! what the deuce is this?"

He took the light from my hand and stooped to examine something at his feet. It was a steel cylinder, about eight feet in length; a second lay beside it.

"Ammonia! So they run a cold storage on board?"

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"My dear cousin, if you can't remember the part that ammonia plays in the manufacture of ice, I shall not attempt to—hallo! stop that—stop that, I say!"

He sprang forward, caught his foot in an empty sack, and fell heavily, extinguishing the lamp. As he did so, I saw an arm reach down and draw up the grating through which we had descended. A key clicked in the padlock. Graden was on his feet in an instant, and together we rushed to the foot of the ladder.

In the patch of gray daylight above us we could see the face of the captain looking through the bars, and peeping down at us with a very devil's own sweetest dimple of an old man's smile upon his lips, was Prof. Marnac!

There was a pause, filled with much whispered talk from above. Then the red head of our friend, Tim Blake, came thrusting into the picture. He seemed much distressed at the situation.

"Faith! but 'tis not Oi that knows f'what to belave," said he; "but the skipper here will have it that yer're a pair iv despree and revolting characters. Oi am also to tell ye, gintle-ment, that ye've the very devil's own choice of us. Either ye will let me run through yer pockets wid me practiced hand, upon which ye may come up an' make us acquainted wid yer general defense, or, if ye refuse, be jabbers! but they'll clap on the hatchet, have ye in the dark."

"The skipper, Blake," said my cousin, "that he has been grossly deceived, for we are law-abiding English gentlemen. Nevertheless, if he will keep to his terms and hear our case out, we consent to being searched."

"The Irishman vanished and again came the murmur of voices. Then he reappeared, unlocking the grating and descending the ladder. At the edge of the hole I could see the faces of several members of the crew and caught the gleam of drawn knives. Evidently they did not trust us."

When it was over, we followed Blake up the ladder and waited quietly while he laid out Graden's revolver and our few belongings on the flap of a central table, behind which the captain was standing. A short speech by the worthy, and the Irishman began again: "The skipper would have ye know," he said, addressing Graden with a growing dignity that would have been comic enough at a less unfortunate moment, "that ye stand accused iv carrying off the ould gint yonder and committin' burglary on 'is person. F'what do ye say to that, sorr?"

"It is absolutely untrue."

"Wan for him, thin. But Oi'm to ask ye how ye account fer th' possession iv that pocketbook the skipper is holdin' so loving in his hand. He says that there's close on 500 pounds in it. Is it yours?"

"No—it belongs to the old gentleman."

"The devil it does! Then how did ye come by it?"

I felt certain that if my cousin could have told his story directly to the captain, the honesty of his manner and the simplicity of his narration would have had effect. But this pleading at second-hand was a sorry business. From his long pauses and facial contortions I soon gathered that Blake was not the linguist that he claimed to be. Indeed, the version which the captain received from him must have been something astounding. The tale was scarcely concluded when the captain raised his hand, and the foundering of the interpreter ceased abruptly. This was his decision translated. He would touch at Southampton, where

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